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William Macpherson

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CHAPTER I.

THE LOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF LITERARY STUDY IN SCHOOLS.

THERE are two fundamental points of view—the logical and the psychological—from which it is necessary that a teacher should regard the particular branch of study which he professes.

When it is said that the teacher should regard his subject from the logical point of view, it is meant that he should possess an adequate and coherent knowledge of its content and nature; and this involves a conscious recognition and logical classification of the distinctive elements that constitute his subject as an organised system and branch of study. The value to the teacher of such an orderly and arranged view of his subject is that it indicates to him the general directions that his teaching should take, and the results that he may hope to achieve.

When it is said that the teacher should regard his subject from the psychological point of view, it is meant that he should consider it not merely as a body of logically formulated and discriminated material, not merely as a surveyed and arranged result, but as

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material resulting from mental processes which, in a modified form, must be reproduced in the pupil's experience: he must consider his subject-matter not in itself, as an abstract and self-contained thing, but in relation to the pupil, as a factor in the pupil's growing experience. He must have studied not only the particular branch of knowledge that he professes, but the general stages of growth in the development of mind. The value to the teacher of this point of view is that it will guide him in the application of suitable methods of teaching, and enable him to vary them according to the particular stage of development of his pupils.

The logical point of view furnishes a firm basis of procedure: it imparts to teaching that stability and authority which results from the teacher's adequate and coherent knowledge of his subject and its possibilities. The psychological point of view modifies the rigidity that would characterise a method based on a purely logical consideration of the subject-matter: it secures that flexibility and practicability which is characteristic of sound method.

The two points of view are not opposed to one another: rather each presupposes and is necessary to the other. While the logical point of view considers a fixed result, the psychological point of view considers the process that produces the result; but a complete understanding of the result necessitates the study of it in relation to the process that leads to it; and a complete understanding of the process necessitates the study of it in the light of the result to which it leads. The teacher's knowledge of his subject-matter, then, is not weakened and distracted, but, on the contrary, is

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strengthened and unified, by the consideration of it from this two-fold point of view.

There are three aspects of Literature which govern any logical conception of it as a subject of study: we may look at it from the standpoint of its matter or content, and from the standpoint of its form, and from the standpoint of its imaginative atmosphere. In an abstract way these three aspects may be considered separately; but in actual literature they are never found apart, and they are essentially interconnected.

When logically analysed, the essential nature of the subject-matter or content of literature is found to be that it should deal with living reality, with some aspect or aspects of the universe which shall appeal to the reader as being real and vital. Literature includes within its scope the whole of experience—life in all its fulness and variety—the experience of all the people who have lived or might have lived or may live: there is no event, no state of mind, no phase of life which, treated in the appropriate manner, may not form part of its subject-matter. It is from this close relationship of literature to life that, for the ordinary reader, the chief interest and attraction of literature proceeds; and for the literary critic also this relationship is of the first importance. In the volume entitled *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*, Mr Walter Pater has pointed out that the distinction between great art and good art depends immediately, “as regards literature at all events, not on its form, but on the matter.....It is on the quality of the matter it informs or controls, its compass, its variety, its alliance to great ends, or the depth of the note of revolt, or the largeness of hope in

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it, that the greatness of literary art depends, as *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Les Misérables*, *The English Bible*, are great art." A literary critic may be absorbed in observing and commenting upon features of diction and style; but his observations and comments will be valueless if he does not recognise that these features must be judged, not abstractly, in themselves, but in their relation to truth, in so far as they reflect life and reality. Thus Sainte-Beuve said: "I hold very little to literary opinions. Literary opinions hold very little place in my life and in my thoughts. What does occupy me seriously is life itself and the object of it." And again: "there is one word," said Maurice de Guérin, "which is the God of my imagination, the tyrant, I ought rather to say, that fascinates it, lures it onward, gives it work to do without ceasing, and will finally carry it I know not where; the word *life*."

The consideration of the formal aspect of literature as a subject of study may be said to include within its scope in the first place the structural form, and in the second place the language and diction, of literary works.

We have seen that the subject-matter of literature, dealing as it does with all the aspects of life, is varied, but at the same time the essence of it—its close relationship to life and reality—is always the same. So too the structural form of literature is varied: it differs in the lyric, in narrative and in epic poetry, in the drama, and in the novel; yet the essence of it is always one, and, when logically analysed, it is found to lie in the suitable adaptation of means to an end. In the producing of a work of art the artist's mind is dominated, consciously or sub-consciously, by an artistic

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end or purpose which moulds the work as a whole and in each of its parts. "In literary as in all other art," says Mr Walter Pater, in his *Essay on Style* (*op. cit.*), "structure is all-important, felt, or painfully missed, everywhere—that architectural conception of work which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigour, unfold and justify the first." And this "literary architecture, if it is to be rich and expressive, involves not only foresight of the end in the beginning, but also development or growth of design in the process of execution, with many irregularities, surprises, and after-thoughts; the contingent as well as the necessary being subsumed under the unity of the whole."

Again, if we consider the form of literature in relation to the diction and language employed, the choice of words and the build of sentences and paragraphs, we find that here also the essential underlying principle is the adaptation of means to ends. The form of a literary work, alike in its general architectural design and in the details of language and diction, is moulded by, and must be essentially adapted to, the nature of its subject-matter. Thus if a poet had chosen for his theme events and deeds of a lofty nature, embodying the thought of an epoch or breathing the aspirations of a people, his work would fall naturally into the epic form. On the other hand, if he wished to express a single thought, his work would assume naturally such a rigidly limited poetic form as the sonnet. So too the diction of literature is moulded by its subject-matter:

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the essence of literary diction is its adaptation of means to ends, its fitness and appropriateness as a means of expressing the subject-matter: in the highest literature the word and the idea are fused and united with absolute justice: the right word, the happy phrase, is struck out in the mind of the writer from contact with reality, as naturally as a spark of fire is struck from a flint. The varieties of literary diction are many: it may be clear, simple, idiomatic, involved, rugged, colloquial, learned, terse, quaint, polished, ornate; but it must always be marked by the essential quality of fitness and truth.

The third element in literature which helps to form our logical conception of it as a subject of study is the element of imaginative atmosphere. Every work of creative literature is permeated by a distinctive imaginative atmosphere. The artist's temperament and all his past experience have woven a variously coloured tissue through which he sees the world as bathed in a variety of distinct and blending hues—the charmed hues of imagination and fancy. The varieties of imaginative atmosphere, as found in creative literature, are innumerable; and as it is the most refined and subtle expression of temperament and personality there is in it an incalculable element that cannot be analysed. Yet the general essence of it may be discovered, and it is always the same: like the essential principle underlying the outward form of literature, it too consists in the adaptation of means to an end, worked out here in obedience to a fine sense of aesthetic fitness and harmony. This sense of fitness will lead the artist to select this imaginative element, and to reject that, as

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being appropriate or inappropriate to his purpose; and the result will be unity of atmosphere. Just as the outward form of a literary work must be marked by unity in the midst of difference, by the harmonious adjustment of the different parts in relation to the whole, so too its inward spirit, its atmosphere, must be marked by harmony. And this harmony of atmosphere is not independent of the adaptation of means to ends in structure and diction: if there be no unity of form and little appropriateness of diction in a literary work there can be no unity of atmosphere. The nature of the subject-matter must be reflected throughout in the appropriate structure and diction and imaginative atmosphere. The three aspects of literature as a subject of study—its content, its form, and its appeal to the imagination—must always be considered as being in close and necessary relation to one another.

It has been said above that the subject-matter of literature is life and reality; and from this truth the teacher may draw the most important inference that the study of literature on the side of its subject-matter may be made valuable and interesting at *all* stages of the curriculum. It is sometimes asserted that literary study is of value to only a limited number of pupils, to those who are naturally gifted with an artistic temperament. But as we are all interested, or capable of interest, in life, so we are all capable of being interested in the study of literature from the side of its subject-matter. Art has been defined generally as being “an expression, satisfying and abiding, of the zest of life¹”; and this is true in the sense that every artist in his

¹ *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, by George Gissing.

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work must be inspired by “supreme enjoyment of some aspect of the world about him.” But by such enjoyment everyone of us—even the lowest intelligence—is from time to time inspired; and whenever we experience this enjoyment—if we look upon a landscape and keenly feel its beauty, when we see amid a crowd a face that interests us and stirs us to a sense of what is in man, whenever in any way a spark of intimate thought or real feeling is struck in us by immediate contact with the world—we are then moved by an impulse which is essentially artistic, because inspired directly by life. In this sense, and with the limitation that few are gifted with the capacity for artistic expression, we all possess “the artistic temperament”; and it may be added that in the teaching of literature, if proper methods be adopted, the human interest of the study may be made to appeal to all our pupils, from the youngest to the oldest. Viewed from the standpoint of its subject-matter, the essential function of literature is to enlarge the scope of our ideas and sympathies, to enrich and develop our human nature, to teach us to see and appreciate rightly “the varied spectacle and drama of life”; and it is this function that gives to the study of literature universal validity, a firm standing at all stages of the curriculum.

A further important inference which the teacher may draw from the nature of the subject-matter of literature is that the study of it, as dealing with life and reality, is calculated not only to create and foster in the pupil a theoretic interest in life and its manifestations, but also to teach him how to live—it has

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a distinct ethical value. Here we touch upon a wide question, the complete discussion of which would involve an examination of the fundamental principles that determine the relation generally of Art to Ethics. Into such a general discussion it is no part of our present task to enter; but a few necessary conclusions which have an important bearing on the teaching of literature may be briefly stated. In the first place, it seems obvious that into literature, the subject-matter of which is as wide as the universe and life, an ethical element must necessarily enter. This will be generally admitted; but it may be asserted, on the principle of "Art for Art's Sake," that the ethical element in literature is essentially irrelevant and should be for the educated critic a negligible quantity. To this it may be replied that the teacher is concerned not with the trained critic but with the immature student; nevertheless, apart from this consideration, and from the standpoint of method, it is important that we should form some idea of the meaning and value that belongs to this principle of "Art for Art's sake." Since all literature may be regarded as a reflection of life, the principle cannot mean that literature is indifferent to moral distinctions: these exist in the universe, and therefore they must be reflected in literature. From the teacher's point of view, an important truth that would seem to be contained in the principle is the negative truth that the end of literature, as of all art, is not consciously ethical: its aim is not consciously to teach or preach. Understood to that effect, the principle indicates a valuable maxim of method: the subject of literature belongs not to the domain of

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Ethics but to that of Art, and so soon as it is used deliberately as a means of teaching morality the teacher has passed beyond his proper vocation and ceased to be a teacher of literature as literature. At the same time, the ethical element is always present in his subject-matter, and as there presented cannot but influence the minds and characters of his pupils. "Literature," says Mr John Morley¹, "consists of all the books—and they are not so many—where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, sanity, and attraction of form. My notion of the literary student is one who through books explores the strange voyages of man's moral reason, the impulses of the human heart, the chances and changes that have overtaken human ideals of virtue and happiness, of conduct and manners, and the shifting fortunes of great conceptions of truth and virtue. Poets, dramatists, humorists, satirists, masters of fiction, the great preachers, the character-writers, the maxim-writers, the great political orators—they are all literature in so far as they teach us to know man and to know human nature. This is what makes literature, rightly sifted and selected and rightly studied, not the mere elegant trifling that it is so often and so erroneously supposed to be, but a proper instrument for a systematic training of the imagination and sympathies, and a genial and varied moral sensibility.....Literature is one of the instruments, and one of the most powerful instruments, for forming character, for giving us men and women armed with reason, braced by knowledge, clothed with steadfastness

¹ "On the Study of Literature," in *Studies in Literature* (Macmillan and Co.).